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## INDIANS OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

By EDWIN F. WALKER



A SMALL WICKIUP MADE OF TULES OR BULRUSHES

SOUTHWEST MUSEUM  
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# INDIANS OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

By EDWIN F. WALKER<sup>revised</sup>

## THE INDIANS IN GENERAL

THE opinion has been widely held that the California Indians were of a very low type, but the more they are studied the more evident it becomes that such a belief is erroneous, because many of their accomplishments were of a high order and some were actually outstanding. For example, California Indians are now generally regarded as the most skillful basketmakers among the primitive peoples of the entire world, and their pottery, particularly that of the desert tribes, is considered to be as well made and as shapely as any in all North America.

The digging of deep wells was a custom of the desert Indians, a custom cited as an evidence of civilization when it was followed by white pioneers. Some places are still known as "Indian Wells."

Whereas the Dutch had to teach the Indians of Manhattan to make wampum, the Indians of California had shell money and a well-established money system when the Spaniards landed; and they were about the only Indians north of the Mexican border who had such a system.

From prehistoric times California Indians mined turquoise in the Mohave desert, and doubtless traded and used this semi-precious stone long before Europeans first obtained it from the Turks and gave it the name "Turkish stone."

The only Indians within the limits of the United States who were constructing board boats when the whites arrived were the Indians of the coast and the islands of Southern California.

Shell ornaments from abalone, olivella, limpet, clam, conus, and many others made by the Indians of the California coast and traded great distances inland, show a high order of workmanship and often are very beautiful.

In fashioning articles of stone, some of the Indians of Southern California evinced a remarkable sense of the beauty of perfect proportions: bowls, pipes, and fetishes of steatite, or soapstone, are noteworthy for their fine execution and esthetic finish; mortars and pestles of granite and fine sandstone are

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accurately graduated and sometimes highly polished; and tiny arrowpoints and long ceremonial knives show a high degree of skill.

The Indian women of California seem to have had "women's rights" long before their white sisters obtained theirs. Apparently these Indian women were treated on a plane of equality as a matter of course. Bearing in mind that the medicine-man, or shaman, and the headman, or chief, were the most influential persons in a village, it is significant that in California sometimes these offices were filled by women.

The use of language is sometimes taken as one of the gauges of civilization. It is stated that the average white American uses a vocabulary of fewer than five hundred words, whereas it is estimated that the average Indian of Southern California employed a vocabulary of about thirty-five hundred words, adequate for expressing fine shades of meaning.

Peace is much talked of nowadays as a mark of civilization. Until the whites arrived there probably had been almost no organized warfare for hundreds of years in most of Southern California, where there were no war drums, no war chiefs, no well-defined tribal organization. In fact, "tribe" meant so little to these Indians that they could give the whites no definite idea of it; consequently most of them are referred to as "Mission" Indians, named after the Spanish missions established in their vicinity, as *Gabrielino* from Mission San Gabriel and *Juaneño* from San Juan Capistrano. Many of these Indians belonged to the great Shoshonean family, who had penetrated the country unknown centuries ago, doubtless as conquerors; but once having secured a foothold, they seem to have settled down to enjoy in peace the climate and the abundant food supply. At the time of the discovery they probably were as inoffensive, contented, and happy as any Indians in all America.

But the white pioneers applied "Diggers" as a term of contempt to all tribes whose women carried sticks with which to dig up edible roots, just as a white gardener would use a spade to gather his potatoes—a food, by the way, which the world obtained from the Indians of Peru.

Nature had not favored most of these Indians with very attractive features or figures—their faces were wide and their bodies squatty—and the mild climate did not necessitate the building of very large houses nor the wearing of much in the way of clothing. And so to the pioneers they were nothing but naked savages—"diggers."



FIG. 1.—Coastal Village drawn by Evelyn Nadeau after painting by C. P. Baldwin.

This contempt increased when these peaceable Indians did not battle to hold their lands. Spaniards, Russians, Mexicans, and Americans crowded them back from their desirable locations until they were practically exterminated. Whereas they had had a population estimated at about 200,000 before the establishment of the missions, in a few generations they had melted almost entirely away. Today more than half of the original California groups have not a single living representative. For this reason and also because few records were made of the Indians while they were living, it is necessary to go back to the dead past and depend upon archeology for much of the picture of their daily life.

#### VILLAGES

The location of a village was always determined by the supply of drinking water. There were three distinct types of location—the coast, the valleys, and the desert. Along the coast every headland that was near a cañon which had fresh water was utilized as a village-site. Flatlands in valleys that were near living rivers or springs were used as sites for villages, sometimes of great extent. On the desert, villages were always near the water-holes.

The coastal villages, where there was no limit to the food supply, were occupied continuously. Valley villages were oc-



FIG. 2—Chumash home life. (From a painting by A. E. Rader)



asionally abandoned for fishing trips to the ocean, hunting trips to the marshes, and seed-gathering journeys to the mountains. The mode of life of the desert Indians was regulated by the necessity of seasonal migrations within a limited area for the varying kinds of game and seeds that supplied their food, and they usually lived in several different localities each year, repeating the migrations season after season.

The living abodes in a village were usually scattering, although sometimes a straight and orderly arrangement was followed.

#### HABITATIONS

The typical house was a brush shelter, dome-shaped, similar to a New England wigwam, but quite different from a Plains tipi (see figs. 1, 2). It is sometimes called a *jacal* (pronounced hah-kahl') or a wickiup. In building it, poles were set into the ground in a circle, and the tops were bent over and tied, leaving an opening at the top for the smoke to escape. The door opening was so arranged as to be away from the prevailing wind, or at the north, away from the heat of the sun. To the upright poles smaller ones were fastened horizontally, and to these was attached a thatch of tules, grass, or brush, or tule matting.

The jacal gave protection against rain and extreme heat or cold, but was not much used except for sleeping purposes, as the family lived outdoors most of the time, cooking at an outside fireplace and spending the evenings there, frequently singing and recounting stories.

The floor of the house often had mats of tules (bulrushes), while about the walls were piles of tule mats or skins of animals for beds and bedding.

The early explorers reported some large community houses in the villages along the coast. Some of the desert houses were not much more than rude brush shelters.

#### CLOTHING

The women wore short skirts of skins or grasses; or they wore two aprons of grass, shredded bark, or strings, one in front and the other behind. The men sometimes wore loin-cloths or breech-cloths of deerskin or of yucca fiber. Children went without clothing. In winter all used skins or a rabbit-skin blanket as a robe in the daytime and as bedding at night.

These Indians wore nothing on the feet except the occasional yucca foot-pads or sandals in the country of the cholla cactus, and the rare use of moccasins when hunting in rough mountain country.

Elaborate feather skirts were worn in some dances, as were headdresses of feathers tied with a band of fiber and down. These headdresses were sometimes in the form of a high crown, quite different from a Plains warbonnet (fig. 9).

#### FOOD

Acorn mush was the staple food. Acorns were gathered in the fall and put into large wicker granaries built upon stakes well above the ground. In preparing this food, the acorn was placed on end in the slight hollow of a rock and its shell broken by a light blow from a small hammerstone grasped by



FIG. 3—Stone mortar with basket-hopper, drawn by Evelyn Nadeau

the Indian woman. The skin covering of the acorns was stripped off and the kernels were then pounded (not ground) into meal by the use of a pestle or pounder (fig. 3). This process was performed in a stone mortar or in a mortar-hole in a boulder. Large bed-rock boulders near oaks bear witness today of the community mills where once the women worked, and where tradition has it that they would sing and chat as they worked. In the entrance tunnel of the Southwest Museum is a model illustrating this industry.

The pounded acorn meal was put into baskets and taken to the place where its tannic acid was leached out by means of water and sand in a hollow by the side of a stream, or in a bowl if no stream were near by. Allowing the sand to settle, the woman would scoop off the clean meal, out of which she made mush. The cooking was done by boiling in water in a water-tight basket or in a stone bowl into which heated stones were dropped. In the desert area pottery bowls were used over the fire; and along the coast soapstone casseroles were used similarly. Various foods of meat, seeds, or roots were cooked in the same way.

The "planking" of fish was accomplished on a slab of soapstone, called *comal* (ko-mahl') by the Mexicans. Fish, fowl, and meat were sometimes roasted in a deep pit filled with live coals, into which the food was placed without removing scales, feathers, or hide—all of which were stripped off when the meal was cooked.

Clam-bakes were readily arranged by alternating layers of fuel and clams. Mesquite (mays-ke'-tay) beans, almost a balanced diet in themselves alone, were pounded in deep mortars and prepared in several ways.

Seeds of many kinds (probably more than a hundred) were shelled, winnowed, and then ground on a large stone grinding slab, called *metate* (may-tah'-tay), with a stone muller or *mano* (mah'-no) and then merely parched or thoroughly cooked.

Many kinds of edible roots and bulbs were dug up, and usually pounded or ground before being boiled.

Important foods were the wild berries, particularly manzanita and toyon or Christmas berry, and the nuts of walnut, pine, piñon, and other trees and bushes.

In the line of meat the bill-of-fare offered much in the various localities, supplied by deer, mountain sheep, tule elk, antelope, desert tortoise, jackrabbit, cottontail, squirrel, various rodents, lizards, grasshoppers, and even caterpillars and larvæ.

Fowl were represented by ducks, geese, swans, and many others. Small birds that were great favorites were pigeons and quail.

There were shellfish of a score of varieties, freshwater fish of many kinds, and saltwater fish beyond calculation.

#### ORNAMENTS

The favorite ornaments were strings of beads made from various seashells. Many were worn about the wrists and neck, and hung down to the waist. Some of these shell beads are so tiny that they cannot be strung with a needle; but all sizes were worn, up to the longest beads that could be made out of the largest clam or abalone shell. Some of the beads were engraved. Beads of bone and also various kinds of stone, especially steatite (soapstone), were worn.

Spangles of iridescent abalone were sometimes attached to broad bands worn about the forehead or the waist. Sometimes deerskin skirts were thickly covered with these lovely ornaments. Ear-ornaments were round plugs of soapstone, or spindles of wood or shell, from which abalone ornaments were pendent. Hair ornaments were long, decorated pins of bone, inserted through locks of hair drawn through the opening of keyhole limpet shells. Nose-ornaments were short cylinders of stone, bone, or shell that were passed through the nasal septum.

Tattooing the face with dots and lines in a deep blue shade was the vogue. This was accomplished by the use of cactus spines and a pigment of burnt piñon nuts.

Body paint was much employed—black from charcoal, red from ochre, and white from white clay, mixed with grease or an oil from seeds or from some other vegetal source.

#### HUNTING AND FISHING

The bow and arrow were used in hunting big game—deer, bear, tule elk, and antelope. Juniper, desert willow, and several other woods were utilized for bows. Arrowshafts were of arrow-weed, or more often of arrow-cane, which was straightened by being softened in the groove of a piece of heated soapstone and then bent as desired. Arrowpoints were of chert, chalcedony, jasper, quartz, obsidian, or other stone that would take a sharp edge. They were made by pressure from a flaker of bone or antler. The most common arrowpoint, however, was of hard wood, about the size and shape of a lead pencil, with a long point, not barbed. Its butt was doweled to fit

into the cane shaft, where it was attached with asphaltum or gum and wrapped with sinew. Feathers were usually parallel with the shaft, though sometimes they were attached in a spiral arrangement which caused the arrow to rotate in its flight (on the principle of a rifle bullet), insuring the greatest accuracy and penetration.

Large game was usually shot at short range, the hunter being secreted in a blind at the lee-side of a game trail or of a water-hole; but for antelope it was usually necessary to surround a herd, an undertaking which required the efforts of many people for several days. Rabbits were captured in large numbers by driving them into a great net or by killing them singly with a rabbit-stick, a flat curved implement which was thrown by the hunter, who often was a young boy.

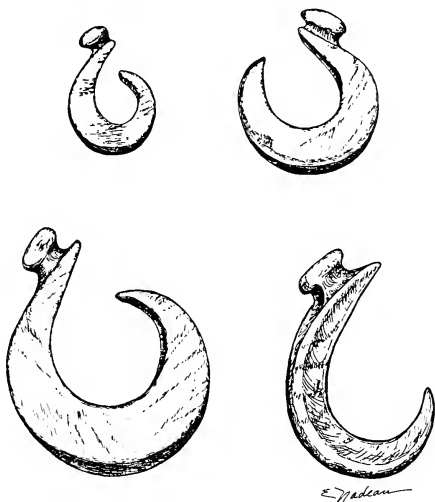


FIG. 4—Fishhooks of abalone shell, drawn by Evelyn Nadeau

Rodents and chuckawalla lizards were snagged on a long slender hook made from the branch of a tree.

Ducks and geese were killed when blinded by great fires at night; or they were snared when attracted by decoys made out of tule; or they were caught in strong nets. Pigeons and other birds were captured in snares.

Fish were caught with hooks made out of abalone, sea-snails, or large mussel shell, or of bone or wood. (fig. 4). They were also caught in wicker baskets or were speared or poisoned.

Abalones were pried off the rocks with implements made of fragments of whale ribs or other strong bones.

Balsa canoes and the *tomolo* board boats were both used in fishing. Sometimes on a lake or lagoon a tule raft would be used, with a large hole in it, so that the fisherman could spear the fish when they came into the shadow of the raft.

## BOATS

Where tules were obtainable, a light canoe, known as a *balsa*, was made. This consisted of long bundles of tules tied together so as to be high at prow and stern, and with the sides raised above the level of the body of the canoe. It was a practical craft for lagoons and for use in other rather smooth waters; but as this craft was not very durable, it did not last long.

The *tomolo* was a real boat. This was made of pine boards, and was very durable and seaworthy. In constructing it, pine trees were felled or driftwood secured. The logs were split into planks by driving in wedges of deer antler or whale rib, and the planks or boards were sawed with thin sharp stones, and planed and "sandpapered" with stones. Holes were made along the edges with stone drills. A two-inch plank was used for the bottom of the boat, and inch-thick boards for the sides. These were laced together with fiber cords, and holes and cracks were filled with melted asphaltum. The result was a water-tight boat. (A *tomolo* in process of construction is shown in fig. 2.)

The boat was long and narrow, with high sides, and higher prow and stern. *Tomolos* were of varying sizes, to hold from three to twenty people. The paddlers had double-bladed paddles on ten-foot handles, and paddled in unison as they sang.

Great rafts were made of bundles of tule, and were used for transporting materials over considerable distances.

## MANUFACTURES

Basketry ranged from small treasure baskets to large burden baskets, including baskets for use as caps, as winnowing trays, and for containers of different sizes (fig. 5). Usually the method followed was that of the coil over a bundle foundation. Material was willow, alder, yucca, juncus, and other vegetal products. Designs were worked out in black and brown. The proportions of the baskets and the exquisite workmanship shown by the women have never been excelled. Baskets were often articles of barter.

Pottery was made by the women out of desert clays tempered with sand. The paddle-and-anvil method was usually followed. In rare cases the pottery was decorated, usually with dot, line, and triangle designs in red. The forms included round cooking bowls (some very large), cooking pots, food

bowls (both round and oval), dippers, ceremonial bowls, great storage jars, and water bottles or ollas from small to large in a wide range of rounded and oval forms (fig. 6).

Most of the pottery was very symmetrical and well made, the ollas being very thin. The pottery was fired to an extreme hardness in an

open fire-pit utilized as a kiln. If a vessel cracked, it was repaired by drilling small holes along each side of the crack, lacing them with strips of wet willow, and filling the crack with melted asphaltum.

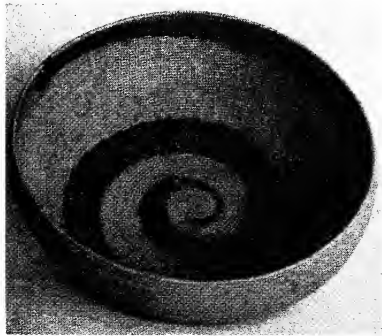


FIG. 5—Ceremonial basket with rattlesnake design



FIG. 6—Typical pottery of the California desert region

Soapstone, or steatite, was quarried on Santa Catalina Island and elsewhere by using very large stone picks without handles. By means of small picks and chisels the steatite was fashioned into cooking basins and bowls (true casseroles) which would not crack in the fire. They were transported and traded over great distances.

Obsidian, or volcanic glass, was quarried in the Mohave Desert and at other places, roughened out into blanks or finished into knives and projectile points, and traded for hundreds of miles.

Salt was obtained by evaporating water at salt marshes or by beating the salt out of salt grass. It was much in demand among those Indians who lived far away from such sources of supply.



FIG. 7—Effigies of soapstone representing birds and a killer-whale



The skins of deer and tule elk, carefully tanned, were popular articles of trade with those Indians who resided at a distance from the hunting area.

Asphaltum was much used for coating baskets, fastening stone knife blades into wooden handles (fig. 8), attaching arrowpoints to their shafts, mending broken pottery and stone bowls, setting beads into bowl rims and into various ornaments, and for countless other uses. Lumps of asphaltum gathered at the shore, where they had been washed up by the waves, were melted and purified, then traded throughout Southern California.

While much of the Indian trading was from tribe to tribe, some of it was conducted at great distances by veritable commercial travelers who journeyed many miles along well-established trade routes, taking with them the various manufactured articles, the prime favorite evidently being shell beads.

#### SHELL MONEY

Shell money was made out of clamshells in the shape of large disc beads, comparable with modern token money of copper or nickel.

One way of measuring a string of clamshell money was around palms and fingers; another way was from the tip of the middle finger to a crease in the palm. When the whites first arrived, such a string was worth only a few cents.

#### GAMES

Games were an important feature. Every village had a level space off at one side where contests were held. Here hoops were rolled and spears or darts were hurled through them; rough games of shinny or hockey were played here with a small oaken ball; the less violent pastimes were the various guessing and gambling games.



FIG. 8—Knife of mottled chert in original wooden handle. (Louis Jerome Gillespie Memorial Collection, S.W.M.)

The great California football game was played by teams from different villages. One or two balls were used. These were about the size of a tennis ball, but were of stone, and were lifted and thrown by the toes, the players devoting most of their time and strength to holding and wrestling with the opposing team. Rallies were held before the game, and celebrations afterward if the home team won.

#### MUSIC

Southern California Indians did not have the drum; but they did have flutes of elder, and whistles, pan-pipes, and flageolets of bone. There were also rattles of turtle-shells, deer-hoofs, split sticks, seashells, gourds, and dried cocoons.



FIG. 9—Ceremonial dance of Owens Valley Paiute

These people had a love of song, and not only sang at their ceremonial dances, but also at their work and about their campfires at night.

#### CEREMONIES

The Indians of Southern California were very religious. They believed in a future life, as evidenced by the custom of breaking or burning all possessions at the death of the owner, so that their spirits would be released to accompany the spirit of the departed to the afterworld. This other world was regarded as much like this one where the same occupations would continue, but every act would be crowned with suc-

cess. Consequently all personal possessions were believed to be required there by their owners.

Whether the body was buried or was cremated, some possessions were destroyed at the time of the funeral, but many were burned in a great fire at the next annual Mourning, probably the most impressive of all their ceremonies.

Of gods or spirits there were many; but the principal one was the great god Chinigchinich, in whose honor there was likely to be a shrine or temple, so called, in the center of the village. This was an oval inclosure of stakes, within which were two other inclosures made of mats and brush. Plumes were placed at the altar, where sacrifices were made, and a sand-painting was produced on the ground in front.

When approaching womanhood a special ceremony was held for young girls; and for the boys there was the initiation, or *toloache* (to-lo-ah'-chay), ceremony, when they drank a decoction made from the datura (Jimson weed), which induced visions that affected their entire lives.

There were many ceremonial dances. Of particular importance were the Eagle Killing Dance and the Whirring Dance, when the noisy bullroarer was whirled in the air.

The medicine-man was an individual of importance, but sometimes his end was a sad one. He was held responsible for the health of the villagers, and whenever a number of people died of an epidemic at about the same time, he was regarded as lacking in power and was executed by a vigilance committee of the relatives, who would surround and shoot arrows into him.

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